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March 2008

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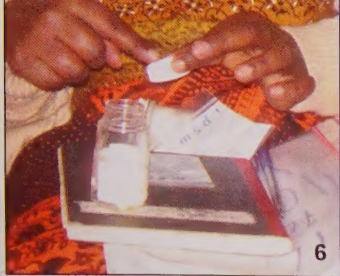


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## SEEING IS BELIEVING

VOLUME 22 NUMBER 2 MARCH 2008

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VOICES

## Seeing Is Believing

by Terri Lackey

**I am a concrete thinker,** a literalist who doesn't do well with metaphors. That renders poetry baffling to me. And Jesus' parables? Well, let's just say I'd be right there with the disciples, looking puzzled. I might even raise my hand and ask Jesus to show me what he was talking about. "Uh, Jesus, could you give me an example?"

For me, seeing is believing. The Beatitude in our Bible study this session is "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." Really? Like the little girl in Martha Stortz's February session, I need a God with skin. And guess what? I have that in Jesus.

Jesus is a show-me God. He ministered to the sick, offered mercy to the downtrodden, welcomed the stranger. That's the kind of pure-heartedness God wants from us.

Heidi Neumark, pastor of Trinity of Manhattan Lutheran Church in New York and a speaker at the 2008 Triennial Gathering, shows mercy to the needy. Her church sees the distress of homeless youth and offers them refuge. In her article, "Buried Windows," she writes: "We reject the way of seeing that looks upon those who are different—even different in ways we don't like or understand—as inferior, defective, evil, unworthy of our every effort and attention."

Welcoming the stranger into our midst is smart Christianity. That guest just might turn out to be Jesus, as he was in the road to Emmaus story in the Gospel of Luke. In fact, that guest just might become the host who shows us how

welcoming strangers unites us, Erik Jon Strand writes in "Breaking, Blessing, Welcoming." "As host, Jesus rewrites the guest list. At his meals, the boundaries between in and out are permeable and loose. Where Jesus is the host, all receive the same gift and the same portion."

While not healing the sick as Jesus did, hospice care offers comfort to those who are terminally ill. Anne Basye writes about a hospice care team from one of 20 hospitals of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, East Africa. The team visits the homes of HIV/AIDS patients bringing medication, health advice, and emotional support.

All this welcoming the stranger, showing mercy to those in need, and ministering to the sick seems to require some sort of purity of heart. Is the road to purity paved with good intentions, wonders Karris Golden in "Pure in Heart." Giving unconditionally and unselfishly—purely—allows for no ulterior motive. We can't wonder how our good deeds reflect on us, she writes. "That's why Jesus confounded and angered many of his contemporaries. Not only did he give everything freely . . . he scoffed at those who demanded an explanation of his motives."

When we gather around the table to share the sacrament of God's body and blood, our hearts are made clean, Martha Stortz writes in her Bible study. May you act on that purity of heart and serve God with the best of intentions. 🌿

**Terri Lackey** is managing editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*.





GIVE US THIS DAY

## Dim Places

by Marj Leegard

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8). I need help! This purity test is beyond me. Most of us need help to see. Almost no one we know is without glasses or contacts. The older we get the more help we need, both for our eyesight and for our heart. This Beatitude is not about checking our physical eyesight. It is about the ability to see God acting in our lives every day.

We had an Auntie Anna who was my stepfather’s older sister. Anna was a happy person and blind, having lost her sight as a rare complication of pregnancy. She never spoke of her blindness as an affliction, but simply as a fact. One day she told us the story of how she had learned to adjust.

At first it was hard. The day’s tasks were insurmountable. She retreated from her children, even the baby. Until my eyesight is restored, I will simply wait, she thought. She sat in her dim bedroom and waited and waited. Her eyesight was not restored.

Then one lovely summer day, her daughters came into her bedroom and took charge. “You’re coming with us,” they said and led her out to the grass under the big tree. They had a blanket spread out, and they persuaded her to sit down. “We hate to patch overalls,” they said. “Anyway, we don’t have time!”

They put a pair of overalls and scissors in her lap. The pincushion was filled with threaded needles. “Now,” they said, “you cut the leg off this worn-out pair and make a patch.”

She felt the hole in the knee and knew that her kids could not wear such ragged pants. She felt the pants they had left for patches and the fabric was soft and worn and she turned the leg over to find a piece for the patch. They left her there before she could protest.

The soft summer breeze and the warmth of the sun felt good on her face. She thought of the days when she was the keeper of the house and she wanted to help her daughters so they could be children again. She began trimming the ragged edges of the hole and the patch she cut out. Her hands and the needle seemed to remember how to stitch and in a short time the patch was done. It felt smooth, and she was proud.

She could not wait to show the girls what she had done. They lifted the patched overalls triumphantly, and burst into a torrent of laughter. They laughed and rolled on the blanket and into her lap. They hugged her and laughed until the tears mixed with patches. Anna had to join in the merriment, but she could not understand what started it all.

Then the girls took her hand and showed her what she had done. The perfectly patched leg was the only leg left on the pants. She had cut the other leg off for patches.

God has promised that in spite of the dim places we must travel, we shall be able to see. Auntie Anna said, “After that experience I was willing to try most anything.” 🌿

**Marj Leegard** and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.



In Tanzania

# Hospice Care Team Comforts the Sick

*by Anne Basye*



*Top, Paulina Gideon Natema, hospice care nurse, with Jamila and her children. Bottom, Margreth Kisay, hospice care nurse.*



Jamila opens the door to a room bursting with cheer. Everything is yellow: the bed, the sofa, the chairs. She invites us to sit in. Jamila made these coverings herself, stitching red flowers into the center, trimming the edges in green.

With a toddler on her lap, she tells us her story. Her truck driver husband left when she tested positive for HIV/AIDS. "I am not sure whether I am his second or third wife," she says, "but the others died of AIDS, too." Now she lives with her mother and brother, and supports herself by selling her needlework and caring for her sister's grandchildren.

Two months ago, she suffered severe fever and nausea and lost weight. Drugs helped, but the fever comes back, and her legs hurt. "I can only take two or three steps before I feel uncomfortable and weak," she says. "It's hard to get to the hospital."

Jamila is 48, just two years younger than I am. She is the first of four women I'll meet today as I travel around Arusha, Tanzania, with a hospice care team from Selian Hospital, one of 20 hospitals of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, East Africa.

Encouraged by international funding from the U.S. government and the United Nations, hospice or palliative care is becoming more common in Africa. Rather than

curative care, palliative care focuses on keeping patients comfortable. The team I traveled with is part of a Selian-based network that attends to the medical, social, and spiritual needs of 1,800 people with AIDS and their families.

Is Jamila's leg pain a side effect of her drugs or the result of nerve damage? Nurses Paulina Gideon Natema and Margreth Kisay talk it over and examine Jamila's blue card, issued by the Tanzanian government to everyone who gets anti-retrovirals (ARVs) to help with the symptoms of AIDS.

Thanks to ARVs, Jamila's life can be prolonged, although her AIDS will never be cured. Meanwhile, her immune status needs to be checked often to ensure that she is responding to her medication. Jamila's record of hospital visits and medications suggests that it's time for another round of tests.

Margreth begins counting out a two-week supply of pills into a small plastic bag. "If your legs don't feel better, we will communicate with your doctor," Paulina says. Jamila puts the medicines and the blue card into her purse, while Margreth writes up her notes.

"You have a Muslim name," says Paulina. "Could we pray?"

"Of course," Jamila agrees. "There is one God."

Pastor Gabriel Kimirei leads a prayer in Swahili, and our visit

comes to a close. As we leave, Paulina tells me how positive she found Jamila's situation. "She keeps herself busy instead of just sitting and waiting, and she is accepted by her family. They let her care for children—a sure sign that she is not stigmatized," said Paulina.

Stigma is such a problem that people—especially women, Paulina says—often hide their HIV status from others, for fear of being shunned or abandoned by family and neighbors.

### Reconnecting Neema

That's the situation for Neema, the next woman we visit. Fyose Hama, the team's community volunteer, tells us that others in her compound are afraid of the infection. Neema's room is dark, and it's hard to make out the shape dozing on the bed. When Paulina opens the window to let in light, Neema struggles to sit up in a chair.

"I was sick for a long time and I didn't know why," Neema explains. "After my husband died, I decided to check my status. I discovered I was HIV positive in 2003, and began ARVs in 2005. I'm better now. Not okay, but better."

The courtyard is full of curious children, and from her window I can see a parade of people passing by. But Neema is very alone. One grown child died of AIDS. Another is married and lives far away. A



son who lives at home isn't around much. Neema's mother is too old and frail to care for her. She is a Christian, but she feels ignored by her church because she cannot get to worship and meetings.

Symptoms and medications are reviewed, but reconnecting Neema to her social network emerges as this visit's priority. "The church needs to be informed," says Pastor Kimirei. "If people knew, they would bring her a cup of tea or some tomatoes, but the information hasn't reached them."

As Neema listens with her head on her hand, the team agrees that Fyose will contact Neema's priest, and Pastor Kimirei will follow up.

After we pray and sing together, she starts crying. "My mind was full of anxieties, but now I have hope."

Bringing hope is the team's goal. About 3 million Tanzanians are HIV positive. Over 60 percent of those are women. Even with ARVs, sustaining AIDS patients is a delicate business. By bringing together a nurse, a social worker, a pastor, and a community volunteer for home visits, "we can care for patients as a whole," says Margreth.

### Caring for children

The third house is even darker. It has a dirt floor and a corrugated iron roof. We sit on wooden stools around Mary. That's her new name. Known for most of her 58 years as Maryam, the Muslim version of Mary, she changed her name when she was baptized. She has one 35-year-old son and lives with her sister's daughter. Two girls follow us in and never leave her side—her grandnieces, who read to her from the Bible every night.

By now I've caught on to the rhythm of a visit. First, the community volunteer introduces everyone. Then the client is asked to tell her story. When the client shows her medications, a more thorough exam can begin and notes can be taken. With help from the social worker, the team gently probes the client's social situation, always with the goal of improving it. Each visit ends with a prayer.

Jamila and Neema kept their medications and blue cards in purses near their beds. Mary's card is under her pillow, and all of her medications are mixed in one bag. It's clear she has problems remem-

bering which drugs to take. She can't keep food down, and she has had diarrhea for seven days. When the team discovers that her 13-year-old niece has been assisting her in the privy, they give the girl rubber gloves and talk about how to keep herself safe.

The voices are quiet, calm. In the corners of the world where people focus on caring for one another, the din of headlines, highways, and offices feels very far away. I feel that focus now, inside this little caravan of loving attention. It's a sacred place.

Headlines matter, of course, because policies set outside these rooms have a lot to do with what happens here. The Tanzanian president, a conservative Muslim, is strongly behind universal testing. His emphasis is very clear: Get tested, get treatment, and get involved as communities.

Fyose, who leads us from home to home, knows her community well. She sees 31 patients about three times a week. She knows when to bring in a nurse to start an IV drip or set up a team visit. She is the one who brings us to our last call in a rural area outside Arusha. It's the

Bringing hope is the team's goal. About **3 million** Tanzanians are HIV positive. Over **60 percent** of those are women.

*Hospice care team from  
Selian Hospital, Tanzania*





home of a 41-year-old woman with six children, ages 7 to 22. Her husband refused to take medication, she says, and died of AIDS and TB.

In this home, the quiet voices grow intense. Large chunks of the conversation go untranslated, and the team seems uncomfortable when they tell me what's happening. This woman is in danger, they agree, because she accepts money from a man for her company. "You must be strong for your children, and speak to them very frankly about abstinence. And take them to church," Pastor Kimirei urges.

Happiness—that's her name—says that her children have tested negative so far. But three tests will be necessary to confirm that they are negative, Paulina reminds her.

#### From dream to reality

"My mother-in-law had cancer, and I wanted to know more about hospice care," Paulina tells me over tea at the end of the day.

An experienced midwife and nurse and a member of the Maasai tribe, Paulina sought hospice training in 1999—and then recruited more nurses, doctors, pastors, and non-medical volunteers to be trained. Now Paulina and her team supervise almost 200 community volunteers, with support from ELCA missionary Dr. Kristopher Hartwig, a palliative care specialist who serves at Selian Hospital.

"Before hospice care, people died at home in great pain," Paulina said. "Through our hospice training, we learned how to control pain."

In the United States, hospice nurses, chaplains, and nutritionists call on clients separately. The Tanzanian professionals visit together—partly because fuel is expensive and partly because it's easier to compare notes on clients. While Jamila and Neema seem stable, the team agrees that Mary and Happiness have declined noticeably.

But there's another reason to visit together. Going into the homes of the dying is hard work, and by visiting as a group, "Emotionally, we can support one another," says Paulina.

Will death be averted by these visits? No. Will healing take place? Probably.

"Treating the spirit will help the body, and vice versa," says Pastor Kimirei. "We bring hope to those who are hopeless, courage to those who have no courage. We become a reason for people to be happy, even when they are struggling with social stigmas and extreme pain." 🌸

**Anne Basye** is associate director for global resources, ELCA Global Mission, and a member of Unity Lutheran Church, Chicago, Illinois. To learn more about the ELCA's global mission work in Tanzania, go to [www.elca.org/countrypackets/tanzania/desc.html](http://www.elca.org/countrypackets/tanzania/desc.html).

## Supporting Hospice and Palliative Care in Tanzania

You can support the development of hospice care in Tanzania by contributing to a fund that will help the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) expand the model created at Selian Hospital to all 20 ELCT hospitals. Your funds will help train medical personnel and volunteers for new teams, and support workshops and consultations that will promote palliative care.

ELCT hospitals, clinics, and dispensaries provide about 15 percent of the health services in Tanzania. Through Selian's hospice care program, more people will benefit from the Lutheran church's health care programs.

**TO DONATE** make out your check to the Women of the ELCA and write "Global Mission: Level II Hospice Development/Tanzania" on the memo line or on a separate note. Send your check to:

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## CALENDAR NOTES

# March

compiled by Audrey Novak Riley  
from sources including Evangelical  
Lutheran Worship (ELW), Sundays  
and Seasons, and Lutheran Book  
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## MARCH

This month Lent concludes and we enter the Three Days—and then the joyous season of Easter!

### 2 Fourth Sunday in Lent

Since the earliest days, Lent has been a time of preparation for baptism. The Gospel stories of the woman at the well, the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus have been part of that preparation since perhaps the seventh century. Does your congregation have any catechumens to be baptized at the Easter Vigil this year? Pray for them, and for all the catechumens the world over.

Today's texts are 1 Samuel 16:1–13; Ephesians 5:8–14; John 9:1–41.

### 7 Perpetua and Felicity and companions, martyrs

In the early days of the faith, the emperor outlawed conversion to Christianity. These women and their companions, all catechumens in Carthage, were sentenced to death. Perpetua's father begged her to give up her faith and save her life, but she said, "We know that we are not placed in our own power but in that of God." They were martyred in the year 202.

### 9 Fifth Sunday in Lent

You might ponder today's first appointed reading and then the Gospel. What do these texts say to people preparing for baptism? What do they say to the already baptized? The passages appointed for today are Ezekiel 37:1–14; Romans 8:6–11; John 11:1–45.

## 16 Palm Sunday

### Sunday of the Passion

From royal triumph to betrayal and execution—the turn of the Palm Sunday liturgy is always shocking. Today's texts are (at the procession with palms) Matthew 21:1–11; Isaiah 50:4–9a; Philipians 2:5–11; Matthew 26:14–27:66.

### 17 Monday in Holy Week

Reflect on the texts appointed for each day of Holy Week as you pray for those preparing for baptism. Today's are Isaiah 42:1–9; Psalm 36:5–11; Hebrews 9:11–15; John 12:1–11.

### 17 Patrick, bishop

This missionary's commemoration is superseded this year by the Monday in Holy Week. You might read Patrick's baptismal hymn to the Trinity, "I bind unto myself today" (*ELW* 450) as you pray for those preparing for baptism.

### 18 Tuesday in Holy Week

What do the psalms of Holy Week tell us? Some have said they reflect what was on Jesus' mind during the events related in the Gospels. Certainly he knew the psalms as well as we know the prayer he taught us. Today's texts are Isaiah 49:1–7; Psalm 71:1–14; 1 Corinthians 1:18–31; John 12:20–36.

### 19 Wednesday in Holy Week

This day has long been called "Spy Wednesday." Read today's Gospel for the reason. Today's texts are Isaiah 50:4–9a; Psalm 70; Hebrews 12:1–3; John 13:21–32.



## 20 Maundy Thursday

The texts for tonight's service tell us about the instructions for the first Passover meal, Paul's description of the institution of the Eucharist, and what happened at the Passover meal Jesus kept with his disciples. You'd think the Gospel would tell us more about what happened at the table, wouldn't you? But no, we hear about something else—Jesus and the Gospel writer must have thought it was equally important. Tonight's texts are Exodus 12:1–14; Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26; John 13:1–17, 31b–35.

## 21 Good Friday

If you're not able to attend tonight's service, you might read the texts appointed for Good Friday. If you're not able to read them all, read at least the Gospel and the Psalm. What light do they cast on each other? Isaiah 52:13–53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16–25 or Hebrews 4:14–16, 5:7–9; John 18:1–19:42.

## 22 Resurrection of Our Lord Vigil of Easter

The great Vigil is the pinnacle of the church's year, the night when we gather in the light of the Easter candle and rejoice in the history of salvation—from Creation to Resurrection!—and then we add to the story by welcoming new brothers and sisters into the family of God with the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. Alleluia, thanks be to God!

If you aren't able to attend tonight's Vigil, you might consider the appointed texts with this in mind: What do these passages say to (and about!) the people being baptized tonight? Tonight's feast of Scripture is: Genesis 1:1–2:4a; Psalm 136:1–9, 23–26; Genesis 7:1–5, 11–18, 8:6–18, 9:8–13; Psalm 46; Genesis 22:1–18; Psalm 16; Exodus 14:10–31, 15:20–21; Exodus 15:1b–13, 17–18; Isaiah 55:1–11; Isaiah 12:2–6; Proverbs 8:1–8, 19–21, 9:4b–6 or Baruch 3:9–15, 32–4:4; Psalm 19; Ezekiel 36:24–28; Psalms 42 and 43; Ezekiel 37:1–14; Psalm 143; Zephaniah 3:14–20; Psalm 98; Jonah 1:1–2:1; Jonah 2:2–9; Isaiah 61:1–4, 9–11; Deuteronomy 32:1–4, 7, 36a, 43a; Daniel 3:1–29; Song of the Three Young Men 35–65; Romans 6:3–11; John 20:1–18.

## 23 Resurrection of Our Lord

### Easter Day

Churches everywhere are packed to the rafters on Easter Sunday. What do we do with all these strangers? Notice what Peter says in the reading from Acts: God shows no partiality. Welcome the visitors as warmly as you would welcome Christ himself.

The texts appointed for Easter Day are Acts 10:34–43 or Jeremiah 31:1–6; Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24; Colossians 3:1–4 or Acts 10:34–43; and Matthew 28:1–10 or John 20:1–18. Alleluia! He is risen!

## 23 Resurrection of Our Lord

### Easter Evening

Tonight's Gospel is one of those stories that you can turn over and over and always find more. What does it say about what has happened in church the last few days? What does it say about the hospitality we showed to visitors at church this morning? What does it say about where we can find Christ? The texts appointed for Easter Evening are Isaiah 25:6–9; Psalm 114; 1 Corinthians 5:6b–8; Luke 24:13–49.

## 24 Joseph, guardian of Jesus

Joseph's feast fell during Holy Week, so the calendar transfers the observance to today. Read the texts appointed for Joseph's day and see what they say about him and his role in God's saving plan: 2 Samuel 7:4, 8–16; Psalm 89:1–29; Romans 4:13–18; Matthew 1:16, 18–21, 24a.

## 25 Annunciation of Our Lord

Here's a hint of Christmas during Easter week. Today's readings are Isaiah 7:10–14; Psalm 45 or 40:5–10; Hebrews 10:4–10; Luke 1:26–38. You might sing Mary's song today; one version of her Magnificat is "The canticle of the turning" (*ELW* 723).

## 30 Second Sunday of Easter

The newly baptized have long taken part in mystagogy during the Easter



season, that is, learning more about the faith into which they were baptized at the Easter Vigil. Both Peter's sermon in today's first reading and the excerpt from his letter in the second reading sound like perfect mystagogy texts. Notice that Peter quotes from today's Psalm, showing us that Jesus' first followers, even rough and ready fishermen like Peter himself, knew those ancient songs of faith by heart. Today's appointed texts are Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31.



OFFICIAL NOTICE

## *Seventh Triennial Convention*

### **Women of the ELCA Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

Notice is hereby given that the Seventh Triennial Convention of Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will be held in Salt Lake City, Utah, at the Salt Palace Convention Center, July 8-10, 2008.

Delegate credentialing will begin at noon (Mountain Daylight Time) on Tuesday, July 8. Delegate orientation will be held at 4 p.m. on Tuesday, July 8.

The convention will open and close with worship. The opening worship service will begin at 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday, July 8. The closing worship service will conclude at 10:30 a.m. on Thursday, July 10.

Everyone is also encouraged to "Come to the Waters" at the Women of the ELCA gathering which will follow the convention. The opening session for the gathering is Thursday, July 10, at 5:30 p.m. The gathering will close on Sunday, July 13, with worship which will conclude at 11:30 a.m.

*Kathy Schnierle, Secretary*

WOMEN OF THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA  
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LET US PRAY

## Be Thou My Vision

by Debra K. Farrington

It had nothing to do with the physical act of using my eyes, but everything to do with seeing clearly. In the midst of a long period of struggle, I awoke one night at midnight knowing—all the way to my core—that God loved me totally and had been with me in the difficult days, even when I hadn't sensed it.

To this day I don't know why I was awakened with that knowledge—that vision. But one thing I know is that I'm grateful for the experience.

Since that time—at least on my good days—I have been trying to make the words of a favorite hymn a reality in my life. “Be thou my vision,” the classic hymn reads; “Naught be all else to me save that Thou art.”

One of the ways that I try to make God my sole vision is by looking for evidence of God in everything and everyone that exists. Like the potter's mark on the bottom of her pot, the divine fingerprint is on each thing the Creator brought into being. There is nothing in this world that does not reveal some aspect of God's divine presence and hopes. My task is to look for, recognize, and give thanks for that.

It's easy to see God in the familiar. Maybe you've seen the children's book *Old Turtle* by Douglas Wood. The mountain sees God as tall and mighty. The fish sees God as a swimmer in the deep. The bear understands God as powerful. Each one sees God as a reflection of itself until *Old Turtle* reminds them that God is all these things, and more. We, too, tend to see the characteristics of God and God's

presence in ways we understand already. But try expanding that vision. Can you begin to see God in unexpected ways and places?

Find an object, something you wouldn't ordinarily think of as holy, and spend 15 minutes looking carefully at it to see what it can tell you of God's actions in the world. Any object will do. I'm looking at wooden shutters right now, for example. They open and close to let light in and out. Each slat is unique—some light pieces of wood, and some dark—and yet they are all beautiful pieces of wood working together to accomplish a particular task. The shutters remind me that God made each of us unique, but still asks us to work with each other. They also remind me that God gave us the choice to be open or closed to the Light.

Once you're comfortable with seeing God's fingerprint in unexpected ways through objects, begin looking at people in the same way. How is God at work in your neighbor, friend, and even the stranger in line with you at the grocery store? If we were made in God's image, we must each reflect that reality in some way. Can you see it in others?

Reminders of God's presence and hopes surround us at all times in everything that exists. Our task is to open our hearts and eyes—physical or metaphorical—to see them, and then God will be, as the hymn says, our only vision. 🌿

**Debra K. Farrington** has written eight books of Christian spirituality. Her Web site is [www.debrafarrington.com](http://www.debrafarrington.com).





# MEDIA AND VIOLENCE WHAT'S A PERSON OF FAITH TO DO?

by Mary Mills

As I sit down to write, I see the front page of today's newspaper: Yet another young person has been murdered in my city. I turn on the radio, and there are grim reports of car bombings in foreign locales. The television schedule is full of stories and images of violence. When I go with my 9-year-old son to spend his hard-saved money on a video game, I know we will have a conversation—we always have this conversation—about why he's not allowed to buy "shooter" games.



One response to this endless stream of media violence is simply to withdraw. Some religious organizations suggest that we boycott television and film altogether, and refuse to let our children even read about violence. The assumption behind this kind of advice is that there is a direct link between seeing depictions of violence and doing acts of violence.

The problem, however, is that violence is part of the human condition. Our brokenness, our sinfulness, is pervasive. Our earliest media document this violence, rather than cause it. In Genesis we read of Cain and Abel, of Sodom and Gomorrah, of armies and kings, of sacrifice and birthright. Even the story of Adam and Eve contains the seeds of violence, pointing to human disobedience and the pain that accompanies it.

No matter how hard scholars try, they have been unable to establish clear links between watching media violence and doing actual violence. Yet clearly there is some connection. We know in our gut that a steady diet of violent media cannot be good. Martha Stortz's reflection on the biblical narratives (p. 27) is helpful here. She notes the advice we are offered—"you are what you eat!"—and suggests that the biblical version would be "you are what you look at." This is powerful advice.

### People of story and of food

We cannot go without eating. Food is nourishment, food is culture, food is creativity, food is family. For many of us, food may be the only connection we still have to our ancestral homelands. The special foods we make for holidays, the ways we prepare festive spaces to share food with friends—these are basic elements of who we are. It is no coincidence that our Christian faith is centered around the table and a meal that is shared.

The same thing is true of media. We can't not see or hear. Human beings need food to live, and we need media to make meaning. *Media* is the plural form of the word *medium*, and it helps to think about a definition of that word—"the substance in which something is grown or cultured."

Human beings are storytellers. God created us that way. We tell stories to figure out who we are, where we come from, where we are going. The Bible is full of stories, and our own personal stories help us connect our lives with God's story. Various media—books, letters, movies, television shows, music, drama—provide spaces in which these stories are grown. They become a way in which we share what we know of God and of what God is doing in our lives.

We are a people of word *and* sacrament. Of story *and* of food.

We know with food that there are practices that are healthful, practices of preparing and sharing food that are good for us, and others that are not. Although scholars cannot claim direct connections between seeing violence and doing violence, they have observed that a steady diet of media violence tends to reinforce ways of living that use violence to express anger or to respond to other violence.

Eating only junk food tends to make our bodies crave empty calories, and eventually we are caught up in a cycle that is very hard to break. Something analogous is true with media. If you watch only "empty" media, you tend to crave more and more of it. The adrenaline flows, but sooner or later the thrill fades, and you need more and more to get that jolt again.

### Healthful habits

There's no federal agency that studies the science of storytelling, of story-sharing. There are no nutrition labels telling us how many calories, how much fiber, how many vitamins our favorite shows contain. But perhaps some of the things we are learning about food can help us as we think about forming healthful habits with our media practices.

Engaging media is about practice more than about content. The content of a show matters—



not all calories are alike—but it is the process through which we watch, through which we listen, through which we tell our stories, that really matters. It makes sense that a household with four people and five television sets watches TV differently than a household with four people and one television set. The latter household undoubtedly argues more about what to watch, but that's part of the point: They are thinking and talking about the stories they share.

Just as with food, it's important that media use emphasizes community, that it emphasizes relationships, that it is something we do more often together than alone. Each of us has some special food we enjoy—for me, it's ice cream—but I know something is wrong if I am eating ice cream by myself. I am much healthier when eating ice cream includes taking a 20-minute-walk with my kids to the ice cream parlor than when it means wolfing down a pint of chocolate pecan ripple all alone in front of the television set. "Grey's Anatomy" may be my television treat of choice, but it's much more fun—and healthier—when I watch it with friends, or at least talk about it with them when we're together.

Thinking about life and death, about what God might be calling me to or guiding me away from, is easier when I'm thinking about

it and talking about it with other people than when I'm all alone. We know that Jesus used stories—parables—to help his disciples think about such things together, and we're still talking about those stories and the conversations he and his followers had about them.

As Martha notes in her reflection on eucharistic living (p. 30), we are one in Christ, and that oneness means that we must learn to attend to the Christ in each of us. Talking about our stories together can be one way we do that.

Living faithfully with media means looking for and watching all kinds of stories, especially those produced independently or locally. Just as it's important to have a certain amount of grain in your diet, to eat some dairy, some fruits, and some vegetables, it's important to make sure that your media diet has variety in it.

If the only media you watch are mass-produced, mass-marketed shows, you might be missing out on some richly satisfying fare. Public television shows interesting programs from all over. Independent and foreign films are available through public libraries and through companies that rent DVDs by mail. Local cable networks are required by law to teach people how to use their equipment, and in doing so, they facilitate the telling of all sorts of local stories.

And what kinds of stories are you watching? Is it mostly Hollywood blockbusters offering the calculated excitement of stage-managed explosions? Or are you also hearing and seeing the stories of women and children who have been driven from their homes in war-torn lands? Mass-produced, mass-marketed media tend to tell only some of the stories of the human condition.

Even local television is not immune from the desire to jolt us with images that feed our fear. But the other side of the story—the people who responded with love and prayer, who reached out in kindness to those who had been hurt, who stopped like the Good Samaritan to help neighbors in need—those stories are not as often told; they don't usually come with dramatic pictures. But finding and sharing such stories is crucial.

Just as we need plenty of fruits and vegetables but not so many sweets, it's fine to enjoy some of the less nutritious stories in our vast entertainment realm, as long as our main diet consists of the stories that will help us attend to all those whom Christ loves.

It is important to tell your own stories and your family's stories in media you can share. Once the disciples on the road to Emmaus recognized Jesus—and he vanished—they didn't cherish the experience



and keep it to themselves; they ran to their friends and shared it. They found ways to tell their own stories of time with him, to share those stories with their community.

People are reclaiming what our parents and grandparents knew: baking bread from scratch, growing vegetables, canning sauces. We are rediscovering that cooking and sharing food is an essential element of who we are, of how we share our families' stories.

Part of the gift of being alive today is that there are more ways than ever to tell our stories. E-mail and digital cameras have not superseded older forms of media—there is more scrapbooking going on than ever before, and quilt-making stories abound—but they have given us more ways to share our stories. Taking photographs and turning them into family histories has never been easier. Creating Web pages to connect distant family members is as easy as starting a free Web log, something you can do on a computer at home or at the library.

### Love and courage

As Martha writes in her Bible study, eucharistic living is about sharing. As we live and grow as faithful disciples of Christ, we need to share our stories. That includes our own stories of sorrow and violence. Perhaps that means the pain of silence around addiction or the hurt of

domestic abuse. Perhaps that means hunger in the midst of plenty or poverty scorned by wealth. Violence may indeed be all around us, but very few of our stories of such violence are shared, let alone the stories of how we meet such violence with love and courage.

The Lutheran community bears a special gift to the rest of Christianity, a deep awareness of the theology of the cross, a deep recognition of our sinfulness and the overwhelming love that comes as God's grace. Here is a story that is written in the very fabric of our lives and must be shared in our media. We can tease this story out of our engagement with even the fluffiest shows on tele-

vision, and we can tell it in the most intimate photos from our own lives. But tell it we must, and share it we must. And that, finally, is how we live faithfully even in a world full of stories of violence. ☙

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### Resources

*National Institute on Media and the Family*  
[www.mediafamily.org](http://www.mediafamily.org)





*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they  
will see God. —Matthew 5:8*





# Pure in Heart

by Karris Golden

Every week, I go through a moment of dread before I drop my envelope in the offering plate. “Is it enough?” I ask myself—not enough for God, but enough to satisfy what I think others think I should be able to give. Instead of wondering about my contribution’s worthiness in the eyes of God, I consider whether the person who opens the envelopes later makes judgments about me based on the size of my gift.

In reality, the intention behind my gift is all that should matter. What is my hope for the good this money can do? What good will come from it? These considerations drive my giving, and my intentions are good. But the public act of placing the gift in the offering plate leaves me consumed by how my contribution will reflect on me.

The root of my anxiety is fear of vulnerability; I don’t want to relinquish control of how this act reflects on me. Giving unconditionally and unselfishly is characterized by great vulnerability. That’s why Jesus confounded and angered many of his contemporaries.

Not only did he give everything freely—from knowledge to himself—he scoffed at those who demanded an explanation of his motives. When asked why he did something, he rarely gave direct answers; he told stories. His explanation was his act, his story was his example—and the faithful understood it.

When I consider my reaction to the offering plate and Jesus’ example, it becomes clear to me that I am not “pure in heart.” While my heart is filled with love, good intentions, and a desire to give, there is also a part that harbors fear. Fear of appearing



weak, inadequate, foolish, greedy, selfish, or even arrogant. The list goes on. The same concern about how others will perceive my offering gift comes out in other areas of my life. I often pause before taking action: Is it too aggressive to ask for a raise? Does this person think I sound silly? What will everyone think if I take the big brownie? The voice asking those questions warns me that if I can't control how others perceive me, "perfection" will remain elusive.

*Yes, we should do our best, especially when it comes to our faith practices. But are we doing our best, or are we striving to make others believe we're perfect?*

#### What people think

We all care about what other people think of us. Part of growing older is learning to avoid the impulse to control what others think of us. As the mother of a preschooler, I am painfully aware that it's impossible to maintain such control. Sometimes I just have to go to work with jelly smeared on the front of my blouse. Then I must resist the urge to explain the stain to anyone who will listen.

Do you feel the urge to explain your mistakes or faults to others—

even complete strangers? Do you believe that not explaining yourself or your actions bears the risk that someone will form an opinion about you without your input? If that idea makes your skin crawl, perhaps you have difficulty with vulnerability. Accepting that others will form opinions about us—sometimes untrue, often unchangeable—is the first step toward being pure in heart.

I began learning this important lesson when I was introduced to a technique in a writers' workshop. Each writer's work is distributed to every member of the group. They then take the work home to analyze it. When the workshop reconvenes, the writer reads her work aloud to the group. As the writer remains silent, the rest of the group discusses the piece—what works and what doesn't. The writer is not allowed to defend her work in any way, even to explain the intended meaning of a word, phrase, or sentence. She can only listen and ask questions of clarification at the end.

The workshop is a tough process. Mature writers find a way to learn from the group's criticisms. If a writer seeks to please the workshop participants, the group will call her on her dishonesty. The workshop is about being willing to be vulnerable. If she can open up and listen, she'll find a way to develop her purest work.

#### Taking chances

I want to be pure in heart. This requires me to evaluate truthfully what motivates my actions. The writer's workshop taught me that much of my behavior was based on a need to please others and gain approval. It also showed me that God's impression of my actions was secondary to me. It was time to ask myself why I cared so much about the former and so little about the latter.

My exploration of this—my secret sinful behavior—makes me believe that many of us have similar issues. We hide some of who we are and present to the world the person we want others to believe us to be. But in being vulnerable, we take our chances. If we are misunderstood, we must remind ourselves that *God gets it*.

Perhaps you sign up to be lector at worship and rehearse over and over again to get that perfect, precise pronunciation. Or you spend hours making flawless cookies for the church bake sale and pawn the lumpy, asymmetrical "seconds" off on your family. Anything less than the best would reflect poorly on you, right? Or would it? Do others really spend that much time judging us, or are they busy replaying their own daily top 10 most embarrassing moments?

Yes, we should do our best, especially when it comes to our



faith practices. But are we doing our best, or are we striving to make others believe we're perfect? Where is God in all this? Wouldn't God be happy with a "flawed" cookie? Wouldn't it taste the same? Why is it that we can remind ourselves of God's forgiving nature but can't give our sisters and brothers the same benefit of the doubt?

Take King David. He was God's golden boy, a popular king. He enjoyed being liked. He seemed pretty close to perfect to most.

His flaw was that he fell for a married woman. How could he continue to be publicly perfect and still get the girl? David thought the answer was to conceal the issue by putting Bathsheba's husband in harm's way. Read the story in 2 Samuel, chapters 11 and 12.

At last, David realized he had to make things right with God. Perhaps he prayed the words of Psalm 51, verse 10: "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and put a new and right spirit within me."

We falter. We fail. We can ask God to renew us. To be renewed, we must lay ourselves bare before God.

### Losing control

I admit I must remind myself to seek to please God first. I must actively remind myself to do what God expects and not worry about the expectations of others. I have to be willing to do what I believe God

wants—even if it leaves me exposed and vulnerable.

This requires daily diligence. I am becoming. I am actively working to become a Christian, a Lutheran, and a fuller, better version of myself. I am becoming a wife, mother, daughter, sister. This journey would be boring if I were already finished. How dull I would be if the person I will become were limited to my imagination.

Poet Theodore Roethke said, "Those who are willing to be vulnerable move among mysteries."

What a reward it would be to be pure in heart. Yet becoming vulnerable is difficult. It goes against our human nature. Our aversion to it begins at a young age, when we fear looking stupid or making mistakes in front of others.

But it is through vulnerability that we learn. Synonyms are *exposed, wide open, naked, susceptible, and sensitive*. Not bad words, but they carry a lot of baggage. Few of us would use such words to describe ourselves. When we hear *vulnerable*, we associate it with *weak, helpless, at risk, and defenseless*. To be pure in heart is to disregard those connotations. We can move to a place where we act, speak, and live from our hearts. I have not reached a point where I do this gladly, but I can do it with great hope.

I have hope, because to be vulnerable is to live in the light

of Jesus Christ. *I have the light of Jesus Christ inside me*. This is my mantra, and it is true. How difficult it would have been for me to type those words 10 years ago; how vulnerable I would have felt. I say my mantra to myself when fear of vulnerability threatens to consume me. I say it aloud on days when I don't particularly believe it. On my journey, I strive to become worthy of such a gift.

We all possess this gift, the light of Christ. We can train ourselves to listen to God's call to open ourselves. In doing so, we accept that we are hopping into God's arms to be carried. We're not in control. We're giving in, trusting that God knows the way, even if it is not the way we would have chosen.

Is there something you hold back from because you fear the ridicule of others? Is this fear keeping you from realizing a dream? Helping others? Risking fully? To fulfill the promise of the sixth Beatitude, we can embrace vulnerability and with God's help become free of self-serving motivations. 🌿

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# BURIED WINDOWS



by Heidi Neumark

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Well, I wouldn't know. Would you? Who among us can boast of purity of heart? Alleyna didn't dare to even imagine it. We were sitting at a table in the church basement eating lasagna. "So," she asked me, "when are you going to give me the lecture?" The lecture? I had no idea what Alleyna was talking about. "The one that every minister gives me." "What lecture is that?" I asked. "The one where you tell me I'm going to hell."

Thankfully, I've always believed that such decisions are made by an infinitely wiser and infinitely kinder mind than mine. I could think of a few candidates, but Alleyna was definitely not on the list. She'd only been staying at our church's shelter for homeless youth for a few weeks, but she stood out for her positive attitude.

Our church is in New York City, a destination for runaways and also for young people who have been kicked out of their homes. A growing number of the latter find themselves on the street because their families cannot accept their sexual orientation and reject them altogether. There are thousands of young people in this category who arrive here from around the



country and find only a few shelters that will welcome them, with only a couple dozen beds. Other shelters are hostile or unsafe. Those who have stayed there describe being urinated on as they sleep or being beaten up. But the streets are worse. Vulnerable teens without resources are easy prey for pimps and predators. They are also frequent targets of hate attacks, particularly transgender youth. One young transgender woman who sought refuge at the church required reconstructive facial surgery to repair the damage left by a particularly vicious assault.

### **Shelter from the cold**

We began the shelter in response to a plea for churches to open their doors for just a week one cold winter, taking the overflow from another shelter. A week seemed just the right amount of time for our limited resources and imagination. At some point during that week, the Holy Spirit intervened and that first week stretched into three. The experience led us to a long, prayerful process in the congregation after which we opened Trinity Place, a shelter for homeless gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth. The shelter runs from nine at night to nine in the morning in our church basement 365 days a year.

Alleyna could not have been a more amenable shelter resident. When dishes needed to be washed or the floor needed to be swept, most guests made a hasty exit, suddenly late for a vital appointment. Or they bickered over whose turn it was to do which chore, or questioned who left the cereal bowl on the table, whose wet towel was on the floor. Alleyna simply picked up the broom or headed for the kitchen sink and went to work. Every morning when I looked in to say hello and see how things were going, a time of day when most of the shelter guests are sullen with sleep, Alleyna had a friendly greeting.

And so it came as a shock during our dinner table conversation when Alleyna told me: "The reason they say I'm going to hell is that I worship the devil." Alleyna did not fit my vision of a devil worshiper. I know it's said that the devil is often disguised as an angel of light, but Alleyna didn't exactly fit the angelic category either. Every morning, she drew dark charcoal circles around her eyes, blackened her lips, and snapped spiked dog collars around her neck and wrists that matched her pointed facial piercings.

### **The story in the window**

All made up, thin and on the frail

side, Alleyna could have been either male or female. In that sense, she reminded me of a figure in one of our church's beautiful stained glass windows. The windows are century-old glorious jewels paid for and set in place by the German immigrants who built Trinity. Now the windows lie sealed in wooden coffins. They had to be removed and disassembled because of the jackhammering going on at the bedrock under the lot beside us. New luxury apartments are going to rise up there, blocking the light that once streamed into our sanctuary. We don't know if the windows will ever see the light of day again. For now, they are buried in their rented tomb and the cost to restore and replace them appears to be beyond our means.

Before they were laid to rest, I preached a sermon series on the stories in the windows. Most of the scenes were easy to match with their biblical source, but one baffled me. In that window, a young adult lies on a cot that has been carried and set before Jesus in a public square. The youth's eyes are almost closed, skin pale as death, pale as Alleyna's skin, with dark circles around the eyes. A woman who appears to be the mother stretches out her arm, imploring Jesus to



do something for her child, who looks to be in his or her late teens, the age of the young people in our shelter.

In preparing to preach, I sat and meditated on the window. Which healing story did it depict? The problem was that I could not tell if the figure in need of healing was male or female. I found this disturbing. Day after day, I sat on a pew, gazing at the window, looking for indications of gender that I just couldn't find. How could I preach without knowing? Finally, it dawned on me: I was more focused on the pronoun than on the healing.

The burden to match the image with the right pronoun is too much for some young people. The attempted suicide rate among transgender youth is estimated to be between 30 and 50 percent. It strikes me that Alleyna's morning routine before the mirror accentuates what has been mirrored back to her for years: You are not normal. You deserve the abuse you get. Her look mimics what she's seen in the eyes of others. What if the mirror that had been held up to her all her life had been different?

Mirrors are a hot commodity in our shelter where the guests jockey for their time to primp and preen. They always seem to need

one more minute, time for one more adjustment, time to get the make-up, the hair, the fit just right. This is typical teenage behavior, but it's accentuated for the transgender youth, waiting to be pleased with the face and the body they see in the mirror. It's a long wait. I've never suffered from gender dysphoria (the opposite of euphoria), which is the medical term for the condition transgender people are faced with, but I know what it's like to wait to be pleased in the mirror. And I know I'm not alone.

There's a song that goes through my mind when I see the flurry in front of the mirrors. Ysaye Barnwell of the group Sweet Honey in the Rock sings "No Mirrors in My Nana's House": Without mirrors we'd never know that we are anything but beautiful—because our beauty is reflected back to us in loving eyes.

That expresses what we aim for downstairs in our shelter and upstairs in our sanctuary. But now we had a self-confessed devil worshiper in the church basement. Was it time to get out the holy water, exorcise the demon, and show the devil the door? Or was it time to listen? I asked Alleyna to tell me what she meant about worshipping the devil, what it was that she believed.

## Listening to Alleyna

I remember three main things from the conversation that followed. The first is that Alleyna believed that God is not in charge of the world. Her reasoning was simple: How could God be in charge with so many terrible things going on? How could a loving God allow all the damage that had been done to her? It was easier to believe that God was not around.

The second point that Alleyna made is that she believed she had to look out for herself because she couldn't count on anyone else. Some people had told her that this means you're worshiping yourself, she added—or the devil. Others would just say that you're a good shopper, embracing the pervasive theology of a consumer culture—taking care of Number One. Did Alleyna participate in any demonic rites, any satanic ceremonies? No. Did she believe in hurting other people? "Of course not!" she said.

Was this the theology of a devil worshiper? How many people in our pews have the feeling that God is not in charge? How many of us live and work that way, acting as though it all depends on us? And would that more of us could claim an ethic that rejects harm to others. Frankly, I did not find Alleyna's statements satanic

at all. If such thoughts pave the road to hell, well, Alleyna will have plenty of pious company.

Should our response to her struggle be to tell her to go to hell? Should we join those who would kick this child of God to the curb or condemn her to the margins, fulfilling her belief that no one cares for her, not even, especially not even, God or the people who worship God? Or would it be better to invite her to come into the church, to find sanctuary, to eat lasagna and sleep in a warm bed and wake up slowly to discover that there exists a community that sees in her things that others miss, the ache for healing, the shining beauty, the image of God etched indelibly upon her heart.

That is what we seek to bear witness to through our shelter: We reject the way of seeing that looks upon those who are different—even different in ways we don't like or understand—as inferior, defective, evil, unworthy of our every effort and attention. Maybe it's because we see that we are unworthy too. Our eyes have been opened to see God not because we are pure in heart, but because we are not, and yet we are loved by One who is. Jesus has come to remove the logs in our eyes to help us see, if only for moments here and there, his

presence in our midst, at the table upstairs as we share bread and wine and downstairs eating with those labeled among the least of these, those who come to the door in need of shelter, food, clothing, and most of all, in need of eyes that light up at the sight of you.

I would like to report to you, dear reader, that Alleyna's time at the church transformed her, healed her, and saved her—but you deserve the truth. Alleyna disappeared. I don't know what difference her time here made. One morning she left and that night, she did not return. What happened? Did she meet a hellish end? Did she catch a bus to another city? Did she wash her face, remove some of her piercings, and get a job at Starbucks? I don't know. But I do expect to see her again, where eyes are clear and hearts are pure. When the light streams in without blockage and we know as we are known and see as we are seen. 🌸

**The Rev. Heidi Neumark** is pastor of Trinity of Manhattan Lutheran Church in New York City. She is speaking at Women of the ELCA's Seventh Triennial Gathering, July 10–13, in Salt Lake City, Utah (see advertisement on our inside back cover). Her experiences in congregational and community ministry led to her book, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*.

WE REJECT THE WAY OF  
SEEING THAT LOOKS  
UPON THOSE WHO  
ARE DIFFERENT—EVEN  
DIFFERENT IN WAYS  
WE DON'T LIKE OR  
UNDERSTAND—AS  
INFERIOR, DEFECTIVE,  
EVIL, UNWORTHY OF  
OUR EVERY EFFORT  
AND ATTENTION.





## BIBLE STUDY

BLESSED TO FOLLOW: THE BEATITUDES  
AS A COMPASS FOR DISCIPLESHIP

### SESSION 7

# Pure in Heart, Rich in Vision

by Martha E. Stortz

See a video clip of author Martha E. Stortz introducing Session 7 of this Bible study at [www.lutheranwomantoday.org](http://www.lutheranwomantoday.org). The Bible study has a blog! Check out [www.lwtmagazine.blogspot.com](http://www.lwtmagazine.blogspot.com).

## Theme Verse

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."  
(Matthew 5:8)

## Opening

Hymn "Be Thou My Vision," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 793; *With One Voice* 776

## Prayer

Gracious God,  
you whom Moses saw face to face,  
purify our hearts,  
so that we may see you;  
prepare our souls,  
so that we may receive the blessing of your Son Jesus,  
image of the invisible God.  
Amen.

## Introduction

I remember the delicious pleasure of seeing a movie in the middle of the afternoon and stepping out into bright sunshine. The light was so bright it hurt after the cool darkness of the theater, but my life was in the sunlit world. I put on my sunglasses and headed out into the brightness.

Seeing God dazzles us in a different way, but our reaction is the same. We want to duck back into the darkness—possibly forever, or at least until our eyes adjust. The prospect of seeing God terrifies more than it delights, and the Beatitude tells us why. Our hearts are not pure, therefore we cannot stand to gaze at what we most desire. What blocks our view?

I want to back into this Beatitude, exploring spiritual myopia, or the things that blur our vision. Just as Jesus healed the blind, he heals us. He repairs our sight in two ways, both by restoring our vision and by being himself an "image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). When we see Jesus, the scales fall from our eyes. When our hearts are made clean through

the sacrament of his body and blood, Jesus enables us to be who we are: creatures fashioned in the image of God. We become “stewards of God’s mysteries” (1 Corinthians 4:1). After all, what are prophets but seers, people who see God’s future? The cry of disciples is the proclamation of Mary Magdalene, the first evangelist: “I have seen the Lord” (John 20:18). The practice of the Lord’s Supper offers us ongoing eye exercises, training our vision on God in our midst.

### **Seeing God—and Living!**

Read Genesis 19:15–26: Lot’s wife.

Read Genesis 32:22–32: Jacob at Peniel.

Read Exodus 33:17–23: Moses and God exchange names—and visions!

Read Philippians 4:8.

“You are what you eat,” proclaim the gurus of food. The biblical version would read: “You are what you look at.” The ancients theorized that two fires light the world for each of us: the fire in the sun and the fire in the eye. The sun dispels darkness, but the fire in the eye illuminates whatever the eye focuses on, casting light on it like the beam of a flashlight. We need both fires to see. Without the fire of the sun we would dwell in darkness; without the fire in the eye we would be blind. Everything seen is imprinted on the heart: People become what they behold. For the ancients, seeing was as much a spiritual process as a visual one.

Not surprisingly, people learned to be careful of what they looked at. In fourth-century North Africa, St. Augustine wrote of his friend Alypius who could not take his eyes off the gladiators fighting in the arena: “When he saw the blood, it was as though he had drunk a deep draught of savage passion. Instead of turning away, he fixed his eyes upon the scene and drank in all its frenzy unaware of what he was doing” (*Confessions* 6.8). Augustine describes addiction in all its compulsiveness. (See article on page 14.)

- 1. Consider all the violence that television and the Internet beam into our homes. Is Alypius’ addiction so different from our own? What are some ways we get hooked by unhealthy thinking?**
- 2. What do you worry about? What’s on The List that you wake up with every morning—or that keeps you awake at night?**
- 3. Have you ever taken Paul’s advice in Philippians 4:8? What did that do for your state of mind? For your state of spirit?**

Then and now, violence enthralls us. We are a lot more like Lot’s wife than we’d like to admit (Genesis 19:26). Given the opportunity to gaze into a future of freedom or watch Sodom burn, Lot’s wife turned toward the burning city.

Maybe it all started with Adam and Eve. After that first bite of the apple, “the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked” (Genesis 3:7). We’ve been looking at ourselves ever since.

There’s a reason for our obscuring our own view. Looking at God is a dangerous matter. Jacob cannot quite believe his encounter with God at Peniel, and he marvels: “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved” (Genesis 32:30).

God knows. God shields Moses from direct sight: “You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live” (Exodus 33:20). In an incident that fascinated Martin Luther, Moses saw God’s “back” instead (33:23). Seen through the lens of this Beatitude, however, the encounter captures our attention for other reasons.

Seeing God is not something Moses sought. But God had chosen him, and part of divine choice includes the kind of mutual revelation that happens between close friends. Shortly after the burning bush encounter, God tells Moses: “I am the LORD.



I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name 'the LORD' I did not make myself known to them" (Exodus 6:3). God shows himself to Moses as "the LORD," and Scripture signals their intimacy visually.

#### **READ ALOUD EXODUS 33:17–23.**

Most of us would run away from the prospect of seeing God. Indeed, the Israelites could not even stand to look at Moses after he'd been with God. The Israelites could stand to look at a golden calf; they even gazed upon a bronze serpent when their lives depended on it (Numbers 21:9). But they would not look at God.

We are like our foremothers and forefathers in the wilderness. Goodness is too much for us sometimes. We say we long to see God's face, but in truth we run from divine goodness, preferring darkness to that great light.

What we look at, what we think about, has the power to transform or deform us. Perhaps Paul is thinking along the lines of the ancients when he counsels the Christians at Philippi: "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Philippians 4:8). Like Augustine and his friend Alypius, Paul knew that we become what we attend to.

#### **4. What blocks your view of God? Of others?**

***Of yourself?***

#### **5. What do you pay attention to: people's mistakes or their accomplishments?**

#### **6. Have you ever "seen" God or felt God's presence? What did you see? Did it focus your attention? Did it purify your heart? What residue remains?**

### **Jesus: The Image of the Invisible God**

#### **READ LUKE 5:1–11.**

In my city, homeless women and men beg for handouts along the downtown streets. My church decided to do something about it; they offered weekly meals and more formal monthly sit-down dinners. The coordinator said: "We just decided to stop thinking of the homeless as a 'problem.' They are people, just like us. Just like us, they want to be seen."

The author of the letter to the Colossians tells us that Jesus is the "image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). Jesus is the God who told Moses, "You cannot see my face and live." Yet I suspect people then regarded Jesus much the way they regard a homeless man on the streets now: ignored as long as he was quiet, jailed if he made his presence known.

Even those who saw Jesus didn't quite know what they were looking at, but in the face of Jesus they saw themselves. Consider the Gospel story of the miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5:1–11). Peter and his friends had been fishing all night; they caught nothing. Jesus got into Peter's boat and told them to put out into deeper water. Peter objected; but he put the nets out anyway—and pulled them in teeming with fish. Peter and his friends were stunned. And suddenly Peter *saw*. He saw Jesus as the face of the living God.

Unlike Moses, who took off his shoes and stood on his ground, Peter fell to his knees: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Was he looking up into the face of the living God, or hiding his own? I think he covered his face. A medieval artist captured Peter at that moment of revelation; his face reveals awe and terror. Ashamed of his sinfulness, he could not stand to look at the face of the living God.

#### **7. Do you think you have seen the face of the living God? Where? On whom or what? What did you do?**

Again and again Jesus healed people with the words, "Your sins are forgiven you." The absolution seems unfairly to equate disease and sin, but it also prevents a reaction like Peter's. In the face of so much goodness, sinful humanity's temptation is to turn away.

Ancient people understood disease as the result of someone's transgression. Because of this, healthy people avoided sick people. That made the sick feel untouchable, even invisible. But Jesus saw them; he touched them. More than that, he erased the fear that they had somehow brought all this onto themselves. He knew that sick people suddenly healed would find themselves facing the burning bush. Afraid that they would turn away like Peter, he reassured them in advance: "Your sins are forgiven."

#### READ JOHN 9:1–38.

Read another healing story through the lens of this Beatitude: the story of the man born blind. All—Pharisees and disciples alike—attributed his blindness to sin, but whose? His own or his parents'? But Jesus rules out their questions. No sin caused the man's blindness. Jesus heals him; the man sees. But the story does not end there. The story goes on to remove the scales from our own eyes, as we look at what the man sees and what he says.

Look through the eyes of this man, suddenly seeing. The first thing he sees is the face of the living God. More like Moses than like Peter, this man stands his ground, gazing into the face of God. He does not need to hide from the view; he simply does what Jesus tells him. He goes to the pool of Siloam and washes the mud off his eyes.

Most healing stories end with the healing, but this one goes on. People hound the man, demanding that he recount his healing again and again. Again like Moses, the man stands his ground, telling them twice: "He put mud on my eyes. I washed. Now I see" (John 9:11, 15). They ask him a third time, and the man

challenges them: "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" (9:27). When the people try to squeeze a confession of Jesus as Messiah out of him, the man stands his ground again: "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing" (9:33). Frustrated, they drive him out.

When Jesus finds the man, he asks him if he believes in the Son of Man, and the man asks: "Who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him" (9:36). Now if the man were speaking to a scholar, these words might be the invitation for a learned discourse on Christology. But the man is speaking with Jesus, the Christ of God. Jesus doesn't need to offer long explanations of his own identity; he doesn't need to justify himself. Jesus says: "You have seen him." Seeing is believing. The man speaks the words his actions have shown all along: "Lord, I believe."

If anyone has a pure heart, it is this man. Truly, he has seen God. The promise of the Beatitude ("for they will see God") and the condition that prompts it ("pure in heart") are one.

**8. *Think of a time when you stood your ground, even though other people disagreed with your point of view.***

**9. *Think of a time when the scales fell from your own eyes and you saw something freshly, truthfully. What was that like?***

#### Disciples: Jesus Tries Again with Us

##### READ MARK 8:22–33.

Chapter 8 is the hinge of Mark's Gospel. Before the conversation with the disciples at Caesarea Philippi, there are miracles and healings; after that they almost cease. Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem. The view of the entire Gospel shifts. Why?

Here in this chapter, Jesus pauses to take the pulse of his ministry. He asks the disciples: "Who do



people say that I am?" (Mark 8:27) They report what they have heard: "Elijah, John the Baptist, one of the prophets." These answers signal to Jesus the deepest longings of the people.

- **Elijah:** According to pious legend, Elijah would return just before "the day of the LORD." In Jesus' time "the day of the LORD" was widely understood to mean liberation from the Roman occupation. If Jesus were Elijah, the liberation of Israel loomed in the immediate future.
- **John the Baptist:** John the Baptist had been a beloved preacher, opening the way of repentance and forgiveness of sins to all. But John had met an unjust end at the hands of Herod, and the people missed him sorely. If Jesus were John the Baptist, the people's beloved preacher would have returned.
- **One of the prophets:** Finally, the voice of prophecy had long been silent in Israel. Though the people had resisted the prophets when they were alive, many in Jesus' time felt that the silence of prophecy meant that God no longer cared about the people once chosen. If Jesus were one of the prophets, it was a sign God still cared.

Then Jesus asks the people who knew him best: "Who do you say that I am?" Peter bursts out impetuously: "You are the Messiah."

- **The Messiah:** According to Jewish expectation, the Messiah would rise up from the desert, liberating the chosen people from the foreign occupier with military might.

Peter hopes that Jesus is that kind of revolutionary leader. Then he could be a general in the great desert army! But instead of presenting a battle plan, Jesus tells a passion story. The Son of Man will suffer, die, and after three days rise again.

Peter wants no part of this, and he tries to silence Jesus. Clearly, not even the people closest to Jesus have

really seen him. Jesus responds sharply. He calls Peter "Satan" and puts him in his place: "Get behind me."

Yet two things give hope to disciples—then and now. First, Jesus does not banish Peter or say, "Get lost!" Jesus puts Peter in his place, but that place isn't the outer darkness.

More importantly, the context of this exchange signals Jesus' commitment to try again with Peter—and with us. Immediately preceding this is the healing of another blind man. Jesus' healing touch doesn't work the first time. The man opens his eyes to see people, "but they look like trees, walking" (Mark 8:24). Jesus tries again, and the second time the man sees.

The placement of this healing story is no coincidence: Jesus tries again with the blind man, and Jesus tries again with Peter. And if Jesus tries again with Peter, he will try again with us.

#### **10. Have you ever had an experience of Jesus**

**trying again with you? What was it you weren't seeing clearly the first time?**

#### **Practice: Seeing Christ in the Breaking of the Bread**

We Christians connect with the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ. We circle back to the Lord's Supper, where once again disciples recognize Jesus "in the breaking of the bread" (see Luke 24:30–31, 35). Here we see the invisible God made visible in elements of bread and wine. As we keep coming back to the Lord's Supper, we become what we eat: the body of Christ.

Eucharistic living has two implications for discipleship. **First**, if we are what we eat, then all who feed on Christ become one. Paul's words are familiar: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). But listen to Paul from another point of view, a strictly dietary one. Jew and Greek, slave and free, men and women: each

of these groups followed different dietary regimes, some by necessity, some by choice, some by religious conviction. No wonder the first fights in these earliest Christian communities were about food! Yet one meal drew everyone together: eating the same food, drinking the same drink. One meal slowly transformed all of them, forming them into one body. We are the visible presence of the invisible God in the world. (See article on page 35.)

**Second**, eucharistic living means that we are to bear the blessing of that meal to others. Eucharist isn't all about *eating* food; it's also about *sharing* it. The presider breaks bread, blesses it, and shares it with someone else. The sharing goes on until everyone is fed. Jesus' meal sets in motion a miraculous chain of events that continues until we share with the hungriest mouth in the world. Shared food nourishes disciples along the way; sharing food becomes our mission. Like the loaves and fishes at the miraculous feedings, the food we share will have no end, for we share the endless goodness of Christ.

**11. What are some ways that we connect with one another through the eating and sharing of food?**

**12. Have you experienced a meal with family, a friend, or even a stranger that brought you healing or strength or reconciliation or celebration? What was it like?**

Christ's goodness is often depicted as an endless feast, an eschatological (end times) banquet. A modern parable describes two great banquets, one in hell and one in heaven. In hell, guests gather around a beautiful table laden with fabulous food and drink. Only one thing is wrong: The silverware on the table is all two feet long. There is no way a guest can reach her mouth with such elongated spoons, and the party turns to pandemonium as the guests first complain and then fall to blows in their frustration.

In heaven, the guests gather around the same stupendous banquet set with the same silverware. Yet, here, the guests dine with pleasure. The long spoons reach easily across the table, and people feed each other. They can feast, because they share.

Let it be so among us, this side of the heavenly banquet. May we share the food we have so generously received until the last hungry child is fed.

**Hymn** "Christ, Be Our Light," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 715; or "Renew Me, O Eternal Light," *Lutheran Book of Worship* 511

### Prayer

Holy Jesus,  
you are the light of the world,  
yet too often we choose darkness  
instead of that great light;  
heal our blindness,  
so that we may see you;  
correct our vision,  
so that we may see the world as you do;  
feed us,  
so that we may become whole;  
empower us,  
so that we may share your light with everyone.  
We pray in the power of the Spirit  
which enlightens the world.  
Amen.

### Looking ahead

In the next Beatitude, the Prince of Peace himself blesses peacemakers, calling them "children of God." Baptism brings us into the family of the children of God, and one of the important values of God's family is reconciliation. 🌿

**Martha E. Stortz** is professor of historical theology and ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, Calif., and the author of *A World according to God* (Jossey-Bass, 2004).



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by Michael Troutman

## Bibles and Bridges

Last summer about 10 members of Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Minneapolis began our regular Wednesday morning Bible study. In Jeremiah 23 we read God's words about false prophets who "lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness." We found an echo in Psalm 82: "They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk around in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken."

Our encounter with these texts brought to mind the tragedy that had occurred within two miles of our church only two weeks before: the collapse of the I-35W bridge over the Mississippi River. In our morning papers we had read of plans to rebuild the bridge as quickly as possible, with little discussion of the possibility of incorporating rapid transit for commuters into the design. It's not uncommon for our

Bible study group to question the judgment of political powers at both state and federal levels.

As we moved to the lessons in the New Testament, our attention focused on Luke 12:56, where we heard Jesus urging us to open our eyes to the reality around us—overdependence on private automobiles, dependence on foreign oil, air pollution, climate change. We asked how our leaders could ignore the opportunity to include commuter rail as part of the bridge rebuilding plans.

Moreover, in Hebrews 11:29–12:2, we read that faith has long served as the cornerstone of resistance to injustice. At that point, Rick Heimark told us of a hearing on the bridge collapse and the rebuilding plans scheduled for that afternoon at the state capitol.

Motivated by the texts and our discussion, Amy Blumenshine and

Jacqueline Moren decided to join Rick at the bridge hearing.

There they listened to legislators question transportation officials. A *New York Times* reporter and photographer were at the hearing covering the story. When their article appeared in the August 16 *Times*, there was a large photo of Amy holding a home-made sign.

It was Bible study that led Amy, Jacqueline, and Rick to attend the hearing. Their faith—expressed in their presence and their signs—played a role in the public debate. Reflecting with others on what the Bible has to say to us can embolden us to speak truth to power. When we faithfully listen and act on our faith, amazing things can happen. 🌿

**Michael Troutman** is a candidate for diaconal ministry within the ELCA. His wife, Amy Blumenshine, is committed to acting boldly on her faith in Jesus Christ.





# BREAKING, BLESSING, WELCOMING

by Erik Jon Strand

At the wise old age of four, my oldest son, Jacob, announced at the beginning of our family dinner that he no longer wanted to pray. “Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest”—he wanted to pray “Jesus come and be our host”! Having begun to visit the homes of friends for dinner, he realized that the guest occupied a place of honor at the table. As a father and pastor, I pondered the interesting theological implications of his request, and though his reasoning seemed to center on himself, I agreed that we could rightly imagine Jesus as the host at our meals whether at home or church.

“Come and stay with us,” Cleopas and his companion “strongly urge” the stranger they meet on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:13–35. Come and stay and eat—be our guest. Had they been moved by the stranger’s teaching on the road or were they acting on their culture’s strong impulse of hospitality, or perhaps a combination of both? Come be our guest—come to our table. Soon, however, the guest becomes host as he took, blessed, broke, and gave the bread to them. Then the eyes of Cleopas and his companion are opened to recognize the presence of Jesus. The event of recognition—of perceiving, of seeing—is distilled in these phras-

es now so familiar to us from our eucharistic table fellowship in the Body of Christ.

But the shape and pattern of the whole story fleshes out this first resurrection appearance in Luke’s Gospel. Two followers, lost in grief and disappointment, are on the road to Emmaus—a road to nowhere? Scholars are unsure of its actual location. As theologian and author Frederick Buechner has written, “Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die” (*The Magnificent Defeat*, Harper and Row, 1966). As Luke’s witness makes abundantly clear, a place beside the lost and disappointed is where Jesus first ends up after the resurrection.

No real surprise here—for in Luke’s Gospel we are continually presented with the searching God seeking out the lost: the shepherd and the lost sheep, the woman and the lost coin, the prodigal father and the lost sons.

## A strange encounter

On the way out of town, walking away from the community that had gathered around Jesus, bereft of dreams and hopes, these two fol-

lowers encounter a stranger. Luke himself can’t hold back from telling us, the readers, that the stranger is Jesus himself, seeking once again the lost—those on the fringes of the city and of life. Jesus interprets to these “dimly burning wicks” and “bruised reeds” the words of Moses and all the prophets to reveal a God whose passion is to bring reconciliation and life to them and to the world. That it was necessary that the Messiah suffer—because this God will do whatever is necessary to bring back the lost: swallowing up death, taking even death itself into God’s own experience and life, giving away God’s very self, risking God’s holiness in a prodigal mercy that defies words to explain—whatever is necessary.

Near the village now, the two of them invite Jesus to “come and be our guest.” “Stay with us,” they urge him. It is no surprise that Jesus ends up at the table with the lost. Just ask Zacchaeus (“Jesus has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner,” Luke 19:7) or the many others with whom Jesus breaks bread. Remember too that once at the table he proclaims to Zacchaeus that “salvation has come to this house . . . for the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.” Invited as a guest, Jesus so often ends up acting as host.

Now, here, at this table, before any word of belief is spoken, before



any acclamation of faith on the part of Cleopas and friend, even before their eyes could see, Jesus took bread, blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them freely—like any good host, like any merciful savior. Like the shepherd seeking his lost sheep, like the woman seeking her lost coin, like the prodigal father seeking his son. Jesus has come near to speak God's yes to the lost.

It is then that their eyes are opened and they recognize Jesus the seeker of the lost, the one who calmed the storms, the one who is risen from the dead. It is then that they return to the community to proclaim that Jesus had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. No longer lost, they journey back to join the community's witness and testimony.

#### Our table fellowship

What happens when we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest"? What happens when we ask this particular Jesus to come and be at our tables? What interpretations about him in all the Scriptures will we let shape our table fellowship? Who will we let share in the meal? Do we imagine him as guest or host? Why does Luke tell us of this appearance to these lost ones before telling us that Jesus also appeared to Simon Peter? How does the breaking of the bread and its prodigal giftedness shape and pattern our

participation, our table talk, and our going out from the meal?

When I was growing up, my family's Christmas Eve dinner was an event with a clear script, menu, and guest list. The pattern was that of a family meal (although extended family were not always present), and the sum of its parts could be counted on to add up to Christmas for us. One year I came home from college to learn that my mother had invited a stranger to our Christmas Eve dinner. She had picked up this person hitchhiking!

My mother had begun a conversation with this woman and learned that she lived alone and had no relatives nearby. Once my mother learned that the woman had nowhere to go for Christmas Eve dinner, the invitation was given: "Come, be our guest. Stay with us!"

How could this be, I wondered. I knew it was the right thing to do but I certainly didn't want it as part of my special Christmas. This invitation overturned the script that had been carefully developed over the years. But there was no way out of it! I wish I could say that it was the best Christmas Eve dinner ever and that this woman became a beloved friend of the family and part of our lives forever. That might work as a TV special, but it is not very true to human experience. It's difficult to change the scripts we cling to. She seemed to enjoy the meal and

the time with us, but I am ashamed to say that I was not particularly pleased. It is difficult to open our eyes and hearts to others.

As a family, we had always prayed, "Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let your gifts to us be blessed," for every meal, including Christmas Eve. What I think I failed to see was how this guest Jesus often ends up as host (and what can happen when he does!). With Jesus as host, Luke and the other Gospel writers tell us, all kinds of people show up for the meal and the script gets rewritten. My mother couldn't help but invite this woman to our special meal because my mother had taken the story of Jesus to heart.

#### Bread blessed and broken

Certainly, speaking of Jesus as our guest serves to accent our welcoming Jesus into our lives. Where it falls short is the notion that we are still the hosts who determine the guest list, the portions, and the table talk. We so often seem to believe that we must protect our meals and this Jesus from those whom we deem unworthy or those who make us uncomfortable.

Seeing ourselves as hosts of the meal, we spend an inordinate amount of energy on who gets to be in charge. We need to change our point of view. Whether at home or at the public meal on Sunday morn-

ing, we must consider what it might mean when the one we welcome as a guest becomes the host.

As host, Jesus reshapes our imaginations and opens our eyes to God's vision. As host, Jesus offers himself to all who come to the table. As host, Jesus rewrites the guest list. At his meals, the boundaries between in and out are permeable and loose. Where Jesus is the host, all receive the same gift and the same portion.

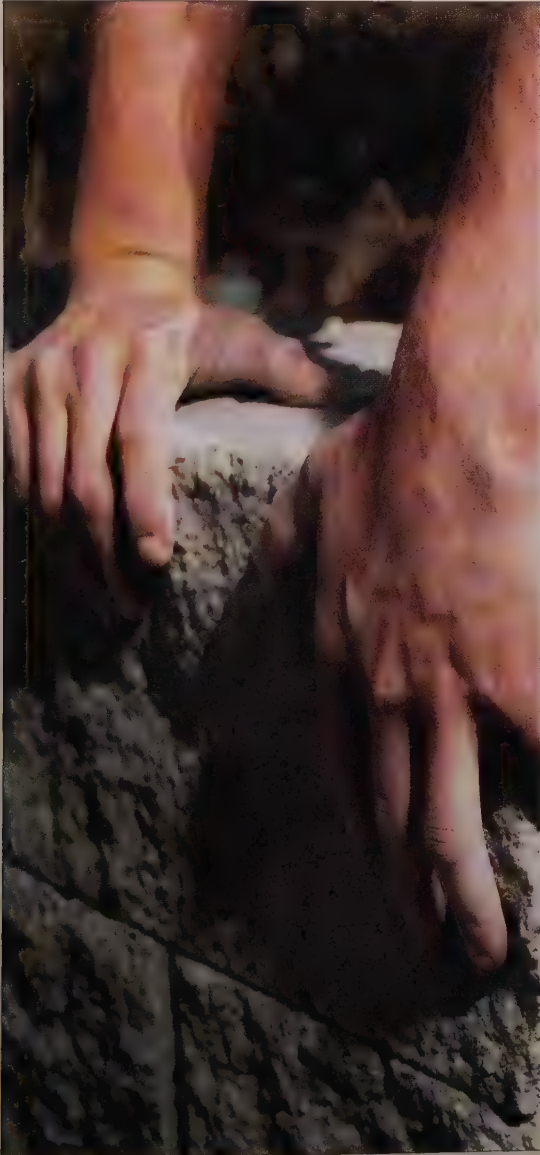
At his meals, Jesus takes bread, blesses, and breaks it, and gives it to all comers with a prodigality that takes our breath away.

Too often we forget that the meal is offered to the lost—to any and all who are traveling along the Emmaus roads of this world. Jesus as our guest too often remains under our management, but Jesus as host stretches and opens our imaginations to God's vision and future.

Let us pray that we continue to see in his taking, blessing, breaking, and giving a vision of God's dominion where all are welcome and all are sent to be bread for the sake of the world.

Let us pray this Easter season "Jesus, come stay with us and be our host!" 🌿

The Rev. Erik Jon Strand is pastor of Edina Community Lutheran Church in Edina, Minn.



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HEALTH WISE

## Yes, It *Is* the Best Medicine

by Molly M. Ginty

### Andrea Behrens has the

giggles, and she knows they're good for her health.

"Since joining a weekly laughter club last June, I've been able to control my allergies and breathe much easier," says Behrens, a financial analyst in New York City. "Research shows that the exercises we do as a group—laughing hello, laughing goodbye, and inventing songs made of 'ha ha ha' sounds—could help me lower my blood pressure and maybe even my weight."

A growing number of Americans are joining laughter clubs, and it's not just for the yucks. Recent research shows that laughter has a whole host of health benefits, from reducing stress hormones to strengthening the immune system. "It relaxes your muscles, opens your arteries, and improves blood flow to your heart," says Steve Wilson, founder of the World Laughter Tour, a Columbus, Ohio, training program for laughter therapy group leaders. "It gives you a cardiovascular workout, helps you metabolize sugar, and releases endorphins, the body's natural painkillers."

How did laughter—which chimpanzees mimic during rough play and which babies start enjoying at age three months—become the latest health trend?

Since Tibetan monks started practicing laughter meditation some 5,000 years ago, health advocates have long known that a good belly laugh is great medicine. Norman Cousins popularized the idea with his 1979 book *Anatomy of an Illness*, in which he described how watching

Marx Brothers movies helped him beat a life-threatening joint disease. The New York-based Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit started sending clowns to hospital wards in the 1980s, and the Association for Applied Therapeutic Humor opened in Aliso Viejo, California, shortly thereafter. Indian physician Dr. Madan Kataria—known as the "Guru of Giggling"—fueled this growing movement in the 1990s by founding laughter therapy groups that spread to Asia, Europe, and North America.

In the past decade, however, laughter as medicine has become especially popular thanks to lab studies proving it has positive effects. Scientists now know that laughter can:

#### PROMOTE HEART HEALTH

Researchers at Baltimore's University of Maryland Medical Center (UMMC) found that people with heart disease were 40 percent less likely to laugh in certain situations than people without heart disease.

#### IMPROVE BLOOD FLOW

UMMC scientists also found that laughter causes the endothelium (the tissue that lines the blood vessels) to expand, increasing blood flow 22 percent. "Laughter helps with coagulation, blood thickening, and the whole vascular system," says lead researcher Dr. Michael Miller, M.D., head of UMMC's Center for Preventative Cardiology.

This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls. Visit [www.womenoftheelca.org](http://www.womenoftheelca.org) for more information.

## KEEP YOU SVELTE

According to studies done at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, laughing increases energy expenditure and heart rate by up to 20 percent—and laughing for 10 to 15 minutes a day can help you drop four pounds per year.

“If done vigorously, laughter can burn 300 to 400 calories per hour,” says Francine Shore, founder of the Grabbag Giraffe Laughter Club in New York City. That’s more than walking (180 calories per hour), cycling (240 calories), or even high-energy dancing (270 calories).

## BOOST IMMUNITY

Studies at the Loma Linda University School of Medicine in Loma Linda, California, show that laughter increases the number of natural killer cells (NK white blood cells) while raising antibody levels, providing protection against viruses and bacteria. Laughter also reduces levels of cortisol, a stress hormone that interferes with the body’s immune response.

## EASE PAIN

According to studies conducted at Arizona State University (ASU), patients are better able to manage and conquer pain with positive frame of mind. “All other things being equal, how rapidly people recover from an operation depends upon their attitude and thus their sense of humor,” says ASU psychology professor and lead researcher Dr. Alex Zautra.

As if these findings weren’t cause enough for celebration, experts say that giggles and guffaws don’t have to be genuine to have a positive effect. “The body doesn’t know the difference between simulated and spontaneous laughter,” says Shore. “Even if you fake laughter, the body still responds in a positive way.”

Supporting the old adage that laughter is contagious, the body responds best to laughter when it’s shared. That’s why a growing number of hospitals and health care centers are hiring World Laughter Tour graduates to work with their patients in groups. “Get one person in a room chuckling, and everyone else can’t help but start,” says Robin Adler, who coordinates a laughter therapy group for patients at the Seattle Cancer Treatment and Wellness Center.

So regardless of what ailments you may face—from short-term viruses to chronic health conditions—remember to treat them with laughter shared with friends and family. “It really does appear to be the best medicine,” says Dr. Miller.

So snicker. Chortle. Crack up! Let loose. In the words of Proverbs 17:22, “a cheerful heart is a good medicine”—not only sound spiritual advice, but a prescription for life-long health. 🌸

**Molly M. Ginty** lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *Ms.*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Women’s eNews*.



For more information:

Vanderbilt University

“Laughter: The Truth behind the Sites”

<http://healthpsych.psy.vanderbilt.edu/laughter.htm>





WE RECOMMEND

## Resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study

### Keep on learning

Want to continue your education at the computer? SELECT can help. A program of continuing theological education videos designed for small groups or individuals, SELECT resources are for lay people, deaconesses, diaconal ministers, associates in ministry, and clergy. Sponsored by the Vocation and Education unit of the ELCA, SELECT works in cooperation with the eight ELCA Lutheran seminaries to offer courses.

Courses provide quality resource materials, including videos, readings, and study guides. While it is usually preferable to study with a small group, SELECT courses are used by individuals as well.

For more information on courses you can take, visit [www.elca.org/select](http://www.elca.org/select).

### Prayers cover PB&J sandwiches

Who knew there's a prayer just for peanut butter and jelly sandwiches? And for macaroni and cheese, and for food from the drive-through, including a blessing for those who make it.

*Peanut Butter and Jelly Prayers* (Morehouse Publishing, 2007) is a new family table prayer book written by Julie B. Sevig, associate editor of *The Lutheran* magazine and parent of three children.

In our busy world, parents and kids realize that mealtime may be the only time they can slow down and connect. Mealtime is also the only time many families pray together.

The prayer book offers rhyming prayers for food familiar to toddlers and young children. Table prayers that honor

special occasions and prayers that follow the church year are included. Table Talk questions follow each prayer, inviting everyone at the table into conversation.

"In this beautiful collection of prayers for families, the author captures the sacredness of meals and a profound sense of God's presence," said Julie K. Aageson, coordinator of ELCA resource centers.

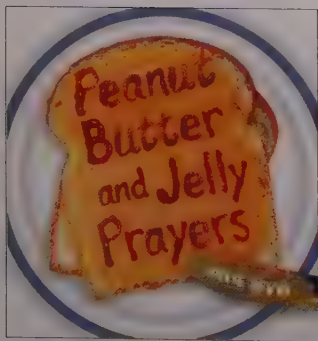
The book is available at your local bookstore and [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

### Studying the Good Book

Women of the ELCA already know what good things come from studying Scripture together; we've been studying the Bible together since our beginnings 20 years ago, and even longer than that in our predecessor church bodies.

The ELCA has launched a five-year initiative, "Book of Faith," inviting all Lutherans to become more fluent in our first language of faith, the language of Scripture. The "Book of Faith" overview reminds us that "as we live into our calling as people who are formed by Scripture, we become renewed in our faith, enlivened through the Spirit, and empowered through the cross of Christ to serve God and neighbor."

The initiative opens the conversation with two passages: Colossians 3:16–17 and Psalms 1:1a, 2–3. Paul and the psalmist both rejoice in the riches that flow from studying Scripture, alone and in community. Wisdom and delight are highlighted in this first conversation with and about the Bible. To read more about Book of Faith, visit [www.elca.org/bookoffaith](http://www.elca.org/bookoffaith).





GRACE NOTES

## Katie's Fund: A Milestone

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



### Katie's Fund has reached

a milestone—it's 10 years old. Known formally as the Katherina von Bora Luther Endowment Fund, Katie's Fund was created in 1997 as our organization celebrated its 10th anniversary. The principal of Katie's Fund generates income to be used for the support of Women of the ELCA ministries in global sharing, leadership development, and living theology.

The average size of a gift to Katie's Fund is \$103. At least 1,375 donors (individual and group) have made more than 3,239 gifts to Katie's Fund. The largest single gift of \$3,454.43 to the fund came in 1997 from the Nebraska Synodical Women's Organization. The Nebraska SWO also holds the distinction for making the largest number of gifts to the fund: 77 in 10 years.

The following SWOs have contributed more than \$4,000 each to Katie's Fund: Lower Susquehanna, Nebraska, New England, Northwestern Iowa, Northern Illinois, Rocky Mountain, Southeastern, Southeastern Minnesota, and Southwestern Minnesota.

From the first gift made by Janet Brewer (a former churchwide executive board member from Soldotna, Alaska) in March 1997, Katie's Fund has grown to more than \$500,000. To allow Katie's Fund to grow in its early years, the interest has been spent sparingly. Still, about \$35,000 has supported ministries with young women at the 2002 and 2005 Triennial Gatherings, global travel on behalf of our organization, and a Women of the ELCA presence at the 2006 ELCA

National Youth Gathering where *Café*, our e-zine for young women, was highlighted among our many resources.

At its October 2007 meeting, the executive board of Women of the ELCA heard a report regarding the 10th anniversary of Katie's Fund and reaffirmed the purposes of this fund. The board authorized the executive director to create a fund option within Katie's Fund, so that donors may make a gift for current needs or a gift to the endowment. The board also authorized the executive director to create and conduct an annual appeal for Katie's Fund.

Gifts to Katie's Fund allow our organization to raise up a new generation of women who embody the best that Katie brought to our faith. Katie was a wife, mother, friend, cook, gardener, brewmaster, innkeeper, and theologian, among many other things. Above all, she was a baptized child of God who lived out her faith in Jesus Christ in creative and bold ways in a culture that did not value women's contributions.

At the Triennial Gathering this July we will celebrate all that has been made possible in the past through your gifts to Katie's Fund as we roll out new ways in which you can support this fund. If you can't be with us in Salt Lake City in July, there will be other ways for you support Katie's Fund. Together we can raise up modern-day Katies throughout the church—women who act boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ. 🌿

**Linda Post Bushkofsky** is executive director of Women of the ELCA.

To give to Katie's Fund, send your check to Women of the ELCA, 8765 W. Higgins Road, Chicago IL 60631-4101. Write Katie's Fund on the memo line of the check.





AMEN!

## Seeing God

by Catherine Malotky

**What do you look like,** God? If my heart were pure, I'd see. How does one have a pure enough heart to see you?

Maybe little babies have pure hearts. They haven't been spoiled by materialism yet. They don't feel envy. They don't struggle with addictions, or gossip about their neighbors or co-workers. They don't really care how they are dressed. Mostly, they just worry about eating and being warm and dry. Developmental psychologists tell us they are completely egocentric—the world's job is to meet their needs.

I don't think this self-focused, grasping kind of pure is the type God has in mind for us adults, though. The world would not work so well if this were standard operating procedure. Yet we all know that our adult selves are not so far away from this kind of fixation on survival. When we plumb our motivations, we don't have to go far to run into greed, gluttony, and jealousy.

Why gossip if we don't need to see ourselves as better? Why medicate ourselves with shopping, or work, or alcohol, or food, if we are not, at least sometimes, desperate to feel something other than inadequacy or insecurity? Why ignore the plight of so many in our world who are hungry or the plight of our world itself as it struggles to keep ahead of our pollution and abuse? Are we not fixated on our own wellbeing now at the expense of our future grandchildren's and great-grandchildren's health and natural resources?

Granted, we do have our moments when we are able to be selfless, to focus on the greater good. We may even reach beyond our own wellbeing and seek first the hope and health of our neighbor before protecting me and mine. But that instinct for self-preservation is strong and will not hide for long.

We could be ashamed of this about ourselves. Scientists have helped us understand evolutionary biology—the selection process that, through generations, means some survived to bear offspring and some did not. That drive to survive is why I am here. My forebears are mine because they were able to meet their basic needs long enough to reproduce. I don't know how many lost their lives because they generously shared food during a famine or jumped in front of the spear to save a friend.

Maybe we need not feel ashamed about these instincts of ours, which have played a needed role. But if we want to see God, we have to be willing to look at Jesus, to see the way he gave and risked and loved. If we want to see God, we can look at Jesus, and see in him God's giving, risking, and loving at work. We can come to the table and eat, and drink God's endless giving, which is God's loving. Humbly, then, aware of our shortcomings, we can come to the table, and see God rejoicing that we have come. Amen. 🌿

**The Rev. Catherine Malotky** serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.



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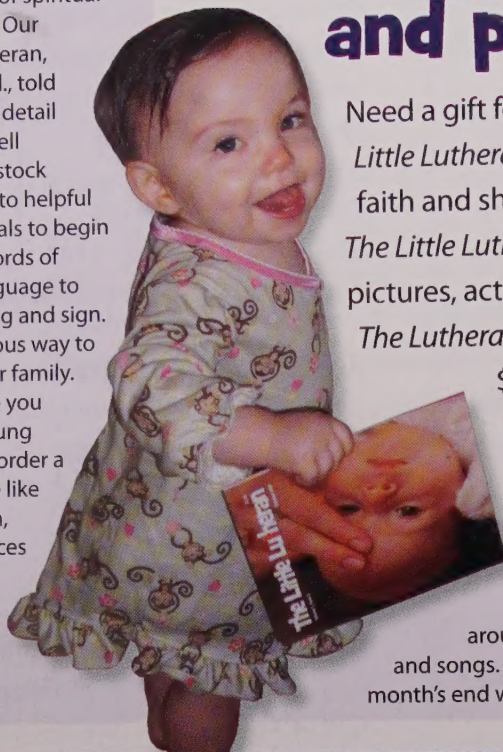
### Pastors recommend it.

Janelle Hooper (left), pastor of spiritual formation at Our Saviour Lutheran, Naperville, Ill., told

her congregation: "Every detail in *The Little Lutheran* is well thought out—from cardstock for little hands to hold—to helpful hints regarding faith rituals to begin with children—to the words of songs taught in sign language to encourage readers to sing and sign. This magazine is a fabulous way to talk about faith with your family.

"I strongly encourage you to think about all the young children in your life and order a subscription. Or, if you're like me and have no children, buy for godchildren, nieces and nephews and for yourself!"

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\$59. Visit [www.thelittlelutheran.org](http://www.thelittlelutheran.org) or mail the form below. For discounted pricing on bulk orders of six or more, call 800-328-4648.

**Children love the magazine.** Here's what Melissa Sease Hooker in Gilbert, S.C., says about her 10-month-old daughter (left): "Caedyn likes to carry *The Little Lutheran* around with her and look at the pictures. She loves the pictures and songs. Occasionally she will sit through the stories. Usually by month's end we have read everything at least three times."



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